

Compromise Curbs Schools Fight

Denis' eleventh-hour proposal accelerates Bells Mill fix and protects Seven Locks.

By KEN MILLSTONE
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Howard Denis was thinking about a lot of things May 16, the night before his last-minute proposal ended a more than five year old conflict over school construction in Potomac.

He was thinking about how to protect a school, Seven Locks Elementary, that Montgomery County Public Schools wanted to close and that his constituents wanted to save—not just

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as an MCPS office building or vacant site but as a school.

He was thinking about how to provide quick relief for Bells Mill Elementary, which is operating with 50 percent more students than seats and where students and teachers became sick this year from portable classrooms contaminated with mold.

He was thinking about Potomac Elementary, the more than 50-year-old school whose overcrowding started the construction debate six years ago and which, despite a multitude of proposals since then, hasn't seen a single improvement since.

Mostly Denis, whose Council district includes all three schools, was thinking about Jarndyce v. Jarndyce, the endless court battle in Charles Dickens's "Bleak House" that carries on until the inheritance at stake is gone, evaporated by decades of attorneys' fees.



Councilmember Marilyn Praisner (D-4), Council President George Leventhal (D-At Large) and Councilmember Steve Silverman (D-At Large) confer during a more than three-hour Council session May 11 to deal with elementary school overcrowding in Potomac.

"This was dragging out for six years. As it dragged out, people were at each other's throats within the different communities and here at the [County] Council and at the School Board," said Denis following a unanimous Council vote that speeds up relief for Bells Mill and adds classrooms at Seven Locks.

The Council and Board were at odds over where to expand capacity. Two weeks ago, the Council shot down a long-standing Board plan to build a new school on Kendale Road. The Board countered with a proposal to build the school slated for Kendale on the Bells Mill site. But Denis appeared to have the votes on the Council to use the same design on the Seven Locks site, against the school system's will.

"We were in terra incognita. It was unclear as to whether or not the County Council had legal authority to actually site a school. That would have been litigated to the Nth degree," Denis said. "And in the meantime, nothing gets done."

The Council avoided such an outcome by unanimously approving the following plan:

◆ Overhaul Bells Mill one year earlier than previously planned. The new school

will now open in September 2009 with a gym and seats for 500-600 students;

◆ Give Potomac Elementary new portable classrooms this summer and new bathrooms next summer;

◆ Modernize Seven Locks and build a four-to-eight classroom addition and a gymnasium there to be completed in December 2011. The county capital budget document tied to the project will state that Seven Locks is to remain open as an elementary school;

◆ Use the additional space at Seven Locks and Bells Mill to relieve overcrowding elsewhere in the cluster. A boundary study will be performed in the spring of 2008;

◆ Make no change to planned construction at Wayside Elementary School and Beverly Farms Elementary School set for completion in fall 2008 and fall 2013, respectively.

The plan was based on a May 12 recommendation by county schools Superintendent Jerry Weast and endorsed by a majority of the Board of Education.

But Denis added the new classrooms at

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Seven Locks, which he called "life insurance" for the school's defenders as well as language that states it will remain a school. Denis also added a provision to scale down the Belis Mill project connection with the Seven Locks expansion—keeping to the Board plan's roughly \$36 million price tag over the next six years for Potomac, Belis Mill, and Seven Locks.

WEAST COMPARED satisfying the competing needs of the three schools to solving a Rubik's Cube.

"We had all been discussing 'anything but war,'" he said. "Sometimes these tense situations—and I've been a superintendent for 30 years—help you come up with some real creative juices."

The solution "keeps it within the budget, without an additional supplement, and works for all of the clusters out there," meaning that other county school projects will not be affected by the Potomac-area changes, he said.

Weast's staff was still crunching numbers an hour before the 11 a.m. Council meeting. Denis hadn't finished drafting the language of his proposal until 11 p.m. the previous night.

"We have just corrected years of problems that have been handed down by other bodies ahead of us, all in one fell swoop," Weast said.

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—Councilmember Howard Denis (R-1)

THE PROBLEMS date back to at least the late 1990s, when Potomac Elementary was severely overcrowded. The county aborted a plan to revamp the school then made and canceled plans for one-step and two-step expansions at Seven Locks to help Potomac and to build on Kendale.

Civic groups, PTAs and community activists at times steered the process and at times were shut out. They rallied around opposition to the Kendale proposal and a February inspector general's report that found that MCPS had not fairly represented the costs of the plan. Most visible was the Save Seven Locks Coalition, which used Freedom of Information Act requests and budget analyses build its case, lobbying county leaders, keeping a Web site, and printing now-omnipresent "Save Seven Locks" T-shirts.

Seven Locks parent Courtenay Ellis attributed Wednesday's outcome to "the power of the people, plain and simple."

DURING THE FIGHT, the School System also proposed giving up several unused properties reserved for schools after County Executive Duag Duncan asked for public land to build affordable housing. The public balked and the plans were withdrawn.

Several sites—such as the current Ivymount School and Hadley's Park site—were given away without public notice in the 1980s and 90s.

Others, including a site on Brickyard Road and the Kendale site, remain vacant.

"I keep asking ... 'Yes but what's happening to the Kendale site?'" West Montgomery County Citizens Association President Ginny Barnes said after hearing of the schools solution. "What's going to happen to it? Is it just going to lay there and be subject to the next Montgomery County Public School system fantasy?"

West Montgomery was one of dozens of citizen groups that opposed building on Kendale, which Council and Board members described as the most contentious school issue since massive school closings in the 1970s.

"Fighting does not solve problems, it exacerbates them," Weast said. "I think that today went a long way to mend those fences and I think that today went a long way to establish trust."

As for Kendale, "People have expressed a lot of issues with regard to that piece of land, and we'll listen, but I have no personal, immediate plans on anything," he said. "It remains our property. ... It was bought in the 1960s, so it's stayed in our inventory for 40 years."